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ON THE SWAHILI DOCUMENTS IN ARABIC SCRIPT FROM THE CONGO (19TH CENTURY)

XAVIER LUFFIN

Si les documents rédigés en kiswahili à l'aide des caractères arabes provenant d'Afrique de l'Est sont bien renseignés depuis longtemps, qu'il s'agisse de correspondance ou de littérature, l'existence de tels documents provenant d'Afrique Centrale, et en particulier du Congo, est encore très mal connue. Pourtant, outre les témoignages de divers observateurs ou acteurs européens des débuts de la colonisation, plusieurs documents conservés pour la plupart en Belgique ont subsisté jusqu'à nos jours. Il s'agit essentiellement de la correspondance de marchands swahilis établis dans l'ancien district des Stanley Falls, mais aussi de traités, d'échanges «diplomatiques» ou de notes personnelles, remontant essentiellement aux deux dernières décennies du 19ème siècle. Ces documents se révèlent être une source intéressante à la fois pour l'Histoire du Congo précolonial et pour l'étude diachronique du kiswahili et de son expansion géographique.

1. Introduction

Though the existence of Swahili documents in Arabic script originating from East Africa – mainly Tanzania and Kenya – has been well documented for a long time (see for instance Büttner 1892, Allen 1970, Dammann 1993 and the recent Swahili Manuscripts Database of the SOAS), very few things regarding such manuscripts in Central Africa, and especially the Congo, have been reported up to now. However, several museums and archives in Belgium and elsewhere hold documents written in Swahili with Arabic script coming from what is today the DRC, along with other documents in the Arabic language.[1] All of them date back to the two last decades of the 19th century. Most of these documents are to be found in the Historical Archives of the Royal Museum of Central Africa (MRAC), Tervuren, but some other Belgian institutions like the African Archives (AA) of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Library of the University of Liège (ULg) and the Army Museum (MRA) in Brussels, also contain some examples of these documents. Other possible sources should be explored, like the personal archives of families whose ancestors worked in the Congo during the colonial time – most of the Swahili documents in Tervuren are personal papers belonging to former Belgian officers, which were donated to the Museum after their death – as well as the archives of Christian missionary orders. Nevertheless, nothing is known about the presence of such documents in DRC today, but we can suppose that some of them have been preserved in places like mosques, Koranic schools or personal archives.

2. The Origin of the Documents

The documents that we were able to trace come from three parts of the Congo: Stanley Falls, Marungu and Uele. Some documents were brought back to Europe as official archives, like

[1] For a general overview of the use of Arabic script in the Congo, see Luffin 2004: 149f.

the set of treaties signed in Marungu and which is now in the African Archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other documents were sent by Swahili traders or local chiefs to European officers, who then kept them as personal archives. Finally, other papers were either intercepted or found in Swahili *bomas* during the battles of the 'Arab campaign', and then kept by the Europeans as a kind of trophy or 'souvenir'.

2.1. Stanley Falls

In 1888, the Congo was divided in eleven districts, one of them being the district of Stanley Falls, which included roughly Maniema, Kivu and the *Haut-Congo* (where the Stanley Falls are located, now Kisangani). The fact that most of the documents come from this area sounds quite logical, since it was the main place in the Congo where Swahili language and culture spread in the second half of the 19th century. The Swahili traders built several cities like Nyangwe, Kabambare, Kirundu and Kasongo.

The main Swahili documents originating from this area are a dozen letters, written between 1884 and 1893, conserved today in the MRAC, the MRA and the Library of the ULg. Some of them were sent by Swahili traders to their companions, while some others were sent to the European representatives of the EIC (*Etat Indépendant du Congo*, Congo Free State), like Nicolas Tobback (1859-1905), a Belgian officer who was the *résident* (i.e., the EIC representative) at Stanley Falls from 1888 to 1892.

All these letters follow the same pattern. They start with an isolated religious formula in Arabic, usually *bi-manni-hi ta'ālā* ('by the grace of [God] the very High'), sometimes *bi-smillah ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm* ('In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate'). Then, a sentence in Arabic – usually one or two lines – contains the name of the addressee introduced by redundant honorific formulas (like *ilā janāb al-shaykh al-muḥabb al-akram al mukarram al-aḥsham al-akh*…, 'to his majesty the dear, generous, respected and pious *shaykh* and brother so and so…') and salutations. Then comes the Swahili text, usually introduced by the expression *fī-mā ba'du* or *wa ba'du* ('after that'), and the expression *nakuarifu* ('I inform you that…'). After the text of the letter itself, the author switches to Arabic again: he greets other persons living in the city of the addressee (*sallim la-nā 'alā al-mashāyikh*…, 'greet the *shaykhs* so and so…'), then the text ends with the name of the author, introduced by a formula like *min akhī-k* ('from your brother so and so') or *kataba-hu al-ḥaqīr* ('written by the humble so and so'), accompanied by the date in the Islamic calendar. If necessary, the author often uses the right margin to end the text. This structure is exactly the same as that in the Swahili letters of the same period found elsewhere in Eastern Africa (see for instance Büttner 1892). Regarding the contents of these letters, they mainly deal with trade in Eastern Congo: instructions given by merchants concerning the routing of their goods, orders of good etc. Sometimes, we also find some information about the local political situation, and some personal messages. An isolated letter, brought back to Belgium and now conserved in the MRAC, is particularly interesting because it was written in Swahili using Latin script, though the signature is in Arabic. It is a message sent by Sayf bin Rāshid from Kasongo to Tobback

in Stanley Falls, in May 1891. Sayf, who had already worked with Storms in Karema during four years, as he mentions in his letter, probably learnt to write in Latin script with them and eventually decided to use it in order to facilitate the reading of his message, or in order to give a good impression to his addressee.

Beside the letters, we also have to mention two other documents. The first is an astrological text in Swahili, written on the inside of the cover of an undated and empty notebook. The document was brought back to Belgium by Francis Dhanis (1862-1909), a Belgian officer who played an important role in the so-called *Arab campaign* in Eastern Congo between 1892 and 1894. The second is a short handwritten note in Swahili – obviously an ex-libris – found on the first page of a printed Arabic version of the Koran, brought back from Kirundu by Louis L'Arbalestrier, a Belgian who worked in the *Province Orientale* in the years 1917-1919. The short text mentions the years 1322 (1904-5) and 1325 (1907-8).

2.2. Marungu

The case of the documents coming from Marungu – the area south-west of Lake Tanganyika, facing Karema – is more intriguing. In fact, they consist of five treaties signed between December 1884 and February 1885 by local chiefs (Kansawara, Uondo, Manda, Chanza and Zongwe)[2] and Emile Storms (1846-1918), the Belgian representative of the "*Association Internationale Africaine*" (AIA), who stayed in Marungu from 1883 to 1885 and founded the station of Mpala. The five chiefs belonged to the Rungu people. Storms was the explorer of the Marungu area, and the founder of posts like Mpala.

This kind of document is not unusual. Hundreds of treaties were signed in the years 1880s, but they were usually written in French or in English, or even in German. Here, the treaties are bilingual, in Swahili and French. The use of Swahili in these documents is quite strange. First, because the other treaties signed in Marungu were written in European languages. Secondly, because the chiefs themselves were not Muslims, and it seems that they did not understand Swahili – Rungu was the main language, but Swahili, Nyamwezi, Bemba, and Holoholo were spoken as well – since we know from Storms that an interpreter was with them during their meetings. So why did they write these treaties in Swahili? We may imagine that Storms decided to use this language because even if it was not directly understood by the chiefs, it was already a lingua franca in Marungu. This, in addition to the fact that the chiefs probably knew or even saw that the Arab and Swahili traders used to draft letters or contracts, may have given the documents a sort of authenticity or legality.

Concerning the structure of the five documents, they follow a similar pattern:

- the date according to the Swahili Muslim calendar[3];

[2] Two copies of the first three treaties are also preserved in the archives of the MRAC.

[3] The Arabic names of the months (*ṣafar*, *rabīʿ al-awwal*, *rabīʿ ath-thānī*) are replaced by their Swahili counterparts: *mfunguo tano*, *sita*, *saba*.

- the names of the representatives of both parts;
- the acknowledgement of the AIA authority by the African chief ;
- the mention of the *hongo* – a symbolic tribute paid as a sign of submission ;
- the mention of a European witness – either Father Isaac Moinet (1849-1908), or the German explorer Paul Reichard (1854-1938);
- the signatures of several representatives of both parts: Storms, a European witness and some Swahili or Nyamwezi *nyampara*, and the chief or his representative and some of his men.

One of the five treaties – the Kansawara one – is a little bit different: the pattern is the same, but the text is longer and mentions the reason of his submission to the AIA, the defeat of the chief Lusinga against the Europeans. The AA and the MRAC versions were written by two different scribes: the writing, the spelling and even the text itself of the two sets of copies vary.

2.3. Uele

The case of the Swahili documents coming from the Uele Basin – in north-eastern Congo – is even more fascinating. In a set of documents written in Arabic and preserved today in the archives of the MRAC, two documents contain a Swahili text. All those documents were brought back to Belgium by Guillaume De Bauw (1865-1914), a Belgian officer at the service of the Congo Free State in the Uele area from 1897 to 1900 and in the province of Equatoria from 1901 to 1904, where he led several explorations and created stations.

The first document is a bifolio containing copies of five texts, one in Arabic and four in Swahili. A sentence in Arabic written on the front page says that the texts are a copy made by a certain Karakara. The four Swahili texts are actually copies of letters – more precisely parts of letters. The second document is the copy of a letter sent by De Bauw to Zemio on December 27 1899, in which he confirms that he received his last letter, and writes that he will try to find the goods asked by Zemio and gives him some information on his departure for Europe. The documents were written by at least two different scribes, using two different spellings. The isolated copy of De Bauw's letter follows more or less the classical pattern of Swahili letters as described in 2.1, though the Swahili text curiously mixes Swahili and Arabic sentences.

In fact, most of the preserved documents coming from the Uele have been written in Arabic language. We know from many sources that Sudanese Arabic had become a lingua franca in this area since the years 1870s, due to the arrival of Sudanese and Chadian traders as well as the presence of Egyptian garrisons. Some local Azande chiefs like Zemio, Jabir, and Rafay became Muslims (de la Kethulle 1895: 407), and most of them were able to speak Arabic or at least had interpreters who knew Arabic (Landerouin 1996: 58, 62, 68, 70, 74).

But not a single source mentions Swahili as a means of communication in this area at that time, though some Swahili traders from Eastern Congo made contacts with Azande from about 1888. We may imagine that, for an unknown reason, Arabic clerks were not available at the moment, and that both Zemio and De Bauw decided to use an alternative, probably Zanzibari soldiers accompanying the Belgian officer on his mission.

2.4. Other Areas

Some testimonies tell us of the use of Arabic script by Msiri, the King of Garengazwe. Actually, Msiri knew Swahili but he was not able to write it. However, he dictated some letters to Swahili traders established at his court (Luffin 2004: 155). In fact, we can presume that Swahili documents were produced wherever a Swahili community settled down.

3. Chronology

Most of the documents – the letters, actually – mention the date of their composition. They all date back to a period going from 1884 to 1899. However, we can imagine that documents in Swahili and Arabic circulated as early as the arrival of the first Omani and Swahili traders in eastern Congo, probably in the years 1860s.

As in East Africa, the use of the Arabic alphabet to write Swahili was quickly rivaled by the Latin script, widely used by missionaries and the colonial administration. However, the use of Arabic script was surely used during the colonial period and afterwards, even in a marginal way. A. Detry, a Belgian who worked as a judge in the Congo in the first decade of the 20th century, wrote that the Bangwana of Kisangani had some books in Swahili written in the Arabic alphabet containing their laws and customs (Detry 1912: 7). Armand Abel, a Belgian scholar who made an inquiry about the situation of Islam in Eastern Congo and Burundi in 1958, claims that he met some local Muslim teachers and clerks who owned books in Arabic, but he does not mention books in Swahili with Arabic letters (Abel 1960). A Muslim Congolese from Maniema told us that he still recalls that at the end of the colonial period some Muslims used to write secret documents in Swahili using the Arabic script, and that the Belgian colonial authorities sometimes employed local Muslims capable of deciphering these messages. Finally, during a visit to Bujumbura (Burundi) in 2005, a member of the Muslim community told us that some elders still use the Arabic script to write their correspondence, though we did not have the opportunity to see any examples.

4. The Authors and the Clerks

The authors of the Stanley Falls letters were mainly Swahili traders. However, these letters were not always written directly by their authors, since some of them had clerks. For instance, we know that Ḥāmid bin Muḥammad al Murjabī alias Tippo Tip, the famous Swahili trader, had a personal secretary called Sālim bin Muḥammad, who knew Swahili, Arabic and English. His nephew Rāshid bin Muḥammad, too, had a clerk and interpreter called Shanzī bin Jum‘a, of Comorian ascent (Bontinck 1974: 295). The Arabic text which usually ends a

Swahili letter sometimes use a standard expression (the name of the writer is followed by *bi-yadi-hi*, '[written by] his own hand'), indicating whether a letter was written by a clerk or by the author himself. It seems that some European officers also had their own clerks who were in charge of translating of their correspondence with the Swahili traders. Francis Dhanis, for instance, had a local clerk called Fundi Lubangi (Marechal 1992: 3, 238). But we may also suppose that the European officers sometimes used the skills of their Zanzibari soldiers in order to read or even write some documents, as it was most probably the case for the treaties signed in Marungu as well as for the Swahili letters from Uele.

5. The Historical Value of these Documents

Some of these documents have a high historical value. This is the case of the five Marungu treaties, first of all because they are the only treaties of this kind and of this period which have been written in an African language, but also because they provide information about the way some agreements with the African chiefs were made in the early colonial period.

Regarding the letters, their contents are apparently superficial, since they deal mainly with trade. In addition to this, the fact that we have a random series of letters does very often render the context very obscure: some persons mentioned in the documents are known and even well known, though others remain totally anonymous today. However, some of them give us information at various levels, like the nature of the diplomatic relations between Europeans and Africans or the size of the communication network in Central Africa. More than their content, the mere existence of these documents does really shed light on the extent of the use of the Swahili language and Arabic script in Central Africa at the very beginning of the European colonization: Swahili traders in the Congo were using a complex web of communication between them as well as with their fellows in Eastern Africa, in Ujiji as well as in Zanzibar. Finally, another very important remark is that writing in Swahili was not limited to the Arab and Swahili traders who came from the eastern coast, since local chiefs and even Europeans found it a very convenient means of communication.

6. Spelling

The various documents show that the spelling was not standardized, each clerk using his own rules. The Arabic script is based on a system where each letter represents a consonant or a long vowel. It has a set of additional signs – expressing mainly the three short vowels (*ḍamma* for **u**, *fatḥa* for **a** and *kasra* for **i**), the lack of vowels and the doubled consonants – which are not usually used, except in the Koran and in the poetry. Swahili, by contrast, systematically notes the vowels of the Arabic. The clerks of the Congolese documents usually use the canonical Arabic alphabet, without additional consonants. This means that some letters may correspond to two different sounds –Swahili having some phonemes which do not exist in Arabic. Regarding the vowels, *ḍamma* may render **o** and **u** and *kasra* may render **i** or **e**. For the consonants, *bā'*, *fā'*, *jīm* and *ghayn*, they may respectively be read **b** or **p**, **f** or **v**, **j** or **nj** and **gh** or **ng**, according to the context. But some documents, like one of the Uele texts and

the Marungu treaties (AA version), use additional letters to distinguish some pairs of sounds: a *bā'* with three dots means **p**, a *fā'* with three dots means **v,** a *'ayn* with three dots means **ng**. Quite often, the stress on the syllable is transcribed by a long vowel (for instance *sāna, khabāri, yāngu* for *sana, habari, yangu*), but again it is not systematical, even within the same text.

The spelling of Arabic terms is usually respected, though it may be modified by at least two phenomena. First, when the clerk notes the stress with a long vowel (the Swahili word *habari* is rendered as *khabāri* and not as *khabar*), and secondly, when he writes the words as he hears them, introducing a new spelling for Arabic loanwords or personal names. For instance, in the AA version of the Marungu treaties, we find the personal names *Ramaḍān, Sa'dallah* or *Khamis,* which are given as *Ramadhani*, *Sadala*, or *Hamisi* in the MRAC version. Sometimes, the same clerk uses two spellings for a word in the same document. In the astrological text quoted above, *ya pili* is sometimes written with a long i (*ya pīli*), sometimes with a short I (*ya pili*). A Swahili letter from the MRAC (Rom papers, letter 1) writes *habari* as *khabāri* and then as *khabari* in the same sentence. Finally, the author of the Marungu treaties preserved in the MRAC gives for the word *shahidi*, 'witness', *shaḥid* and *shayid*.

7. The Language

It seems that all the Congolese Swahili documents were written in *Kiunguja*, the Swahili spoken in Zanzibar. None of the documents show any trace of *Kingwana* – the variety of Swahili which was progressively used as a lingua franca between the traders, the local population and the Europeans in parts of the Congo. This sounds quite logical, since the authors of these documents all came from Zanzibar or settlements like Ujiji and Tabora which had been founded by Zanzibari merchants. The use of *Kiunguja* in the Muslim Swahili community of the Congo seems to have persisted afterwards. In 1956, Harries reported that there was a big difference between *Kingwana*, spoken as a lingua franca by the Congolese indigenous populations, and the Swahili spoken by the Muslim population of Swahili descent, which was very close to Standard East African Swahili (Harries 1956: 396).

Some information can be given regarding the phonology of Swahili at this time, according to the spelling. For instance, it seems that Arabic loanwords were not systematically spoken with the 'Arabic' pronunciation (see 6). Quite often, the words beginning with two consonants are pronounced CvC, like *muwana* for *mwana*, *buwana* for *bwana*, *mujakazi* for *mjakazi*, though this is not systematic, since we also find *mtu*, *mtemi* or *mkubwa*. A last point is the free variation of l and r: some names written with r in the European texts have *lām* (l) in Swahili: Kansawara-Kansawala, Mpala-Mpara etc.

8. Conclusion

The Swahili documents from the Congo shed a new light on the history of Central Africa in the last decades of the 19th century. First, they show that writing was known in Central Africa

before the arrival of the Europeans. Secondly, written Swahili was used not only in eastern Congo, where one can expect it regarding the local history, but also outside the late-19th-century 'Swahili area': Marungu, Uele and Katanga. Another notable point is that *Kiunguja* was used as far as the Congo in this period, either before or in parallel with the local Swahili, later called *Kingwana* (for more information about *Kingwana*, see Fabian 1986). Finally, these documents give us information about Swahili trade as well as the political relations between Africans and Europeans in the period of their first contacts.

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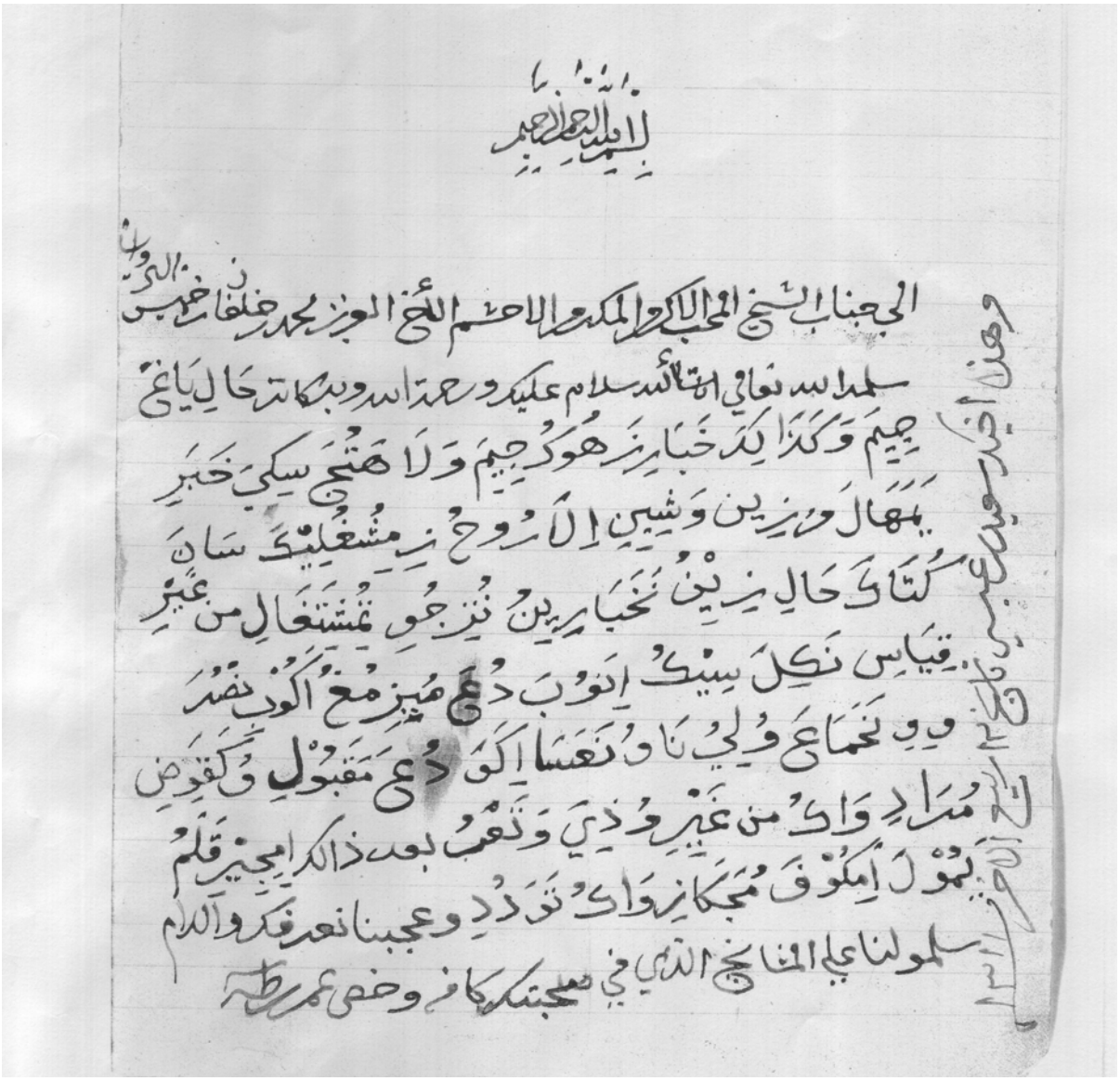
Appendix: a letter sent by Sa‘īd bin ‘Īsa to Muḥammad bin Khalfān bin Khamīs al-Barwānī

This letter has been brought back to Belgium by Léon Rom, a Belgian officer who served in the East of Congo between 1893 and 1895. The document is now conserved in the archives of the MRAC, Tervuren (Archives Rom, RG 1072).

Faksimile of the letter



The Arabic and Swahili Text

1. bi-smillah ar-raḥman ar-raḥim

2. ilā janāb ash-shaykh al-muḥabb al-akram al-mukarram al-aḥsham al-akh al-‘azīz Muḥammad bin Khalfān bin Khamīs al-Barwānī

3. sallama-hu Allah ta‘ālā in shā’ allah, salām ‘alay-k wa-raḥmatu llah wa-barakātu-hu. Hali yangu

4. njema wa-kadhalika habari za huku njema wala hatujasikia habari

5. ya mahala {wa} zenu wacheni ila roho nimeshughulika sana

6. kutaka hali zenu na habari zenu tuzijue. tumeshtaghali min ghayri

7. kiyasi na kila siku {i}naomba dua mwenyezi Mungu akupe nasura

8. wewe na jamaa uliyonao na hasa ikawa dua makabuli ukakawidhi (1)

9. muradi wako min ghayri udhiya wa taabu ba‘ad dhalika imejiri kalamu

10. ya Mola amekufa mjakazi wako Tawadudi, wa-‘ajibnā nu‘arrifu-ka, wa-s-sālam

11.sallimū la-nā ‘alā l-mashāyikh alladhīna fi saḥbati-ka kāfatan wa-khāssan ‘Umar bin Taha

12. wa hadhā <min> akhī-ka Sa‘īd bin ‘Īsa, tārīkh 12 rabī‘ al-ākhar sanata 1311

(1) *ukakawidhi* for *ukakabidhi*

Translation

[in Arabic:] By the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate

To your Honour the dear, generous, venerable, the modest Shaykh Muḥammad bin Khalfān bin Khamīs al-Barwānī, our dear brother, may God the Most High preserve you, with His permission, peace be with you, as well as the compassion and the blessings of God.

[in Swahili:] I am doing well, everything is in order here. We didn’t hear any news from your side, we are worried and we really would like to know how you are. We have been very busy, and everyday I pray God Almighty, so that he gives the victory to you and your companions. If our prayers are accepted, you will obtain what you want without any pain or any trouble. By the way, the will of God has been accomplished, and Tawadudi your slave girl has passed away.

[in Arabic:] we have been struck [by this event] and we inform you of this. Please greet all the Shaykhs who are with you, especially ‘Umar bin Taha. This letter comes from your brother Sa‘īd bin ‘Īsa, it has been written the 12th of Rabī‘ al-ākhar 1311 (23 of october 1893).